

The Body Mender

Pain is the enemy, and one physical therapist is getting his hands on finding a cure for the common ache.

by Tech. Sgt. Mark Kinkade
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

Career field facts

42B — Physical Therapist

Assigned: 168 licensed physical therapists, working in medical centers and clinics throughout the Air Force.

Duties: "Our role is to diagnose movement disorders," said Capt. (Dr.) John Childs. "We use a variety of treatments to restore movement, ease pain and prevent future injuries."

Civilian application: Physical therapy training covers a wide range of applications, including working with handicapped people, rehabilitating injuries and treating movement-associated pain in many career fields. As the "baby-boomer" generation ages and research supports current practices, the doctor said, the need for people trained in physical therapy will continue to expand.

When he graduated from high school, Capt. (Dr.) John Childs had appointments at both the Air Force Academy and West Point. He was leaning heavily toward the Army's officer program when his mother forced him to vacation in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"Much to my chagrin, she kind of forced me to go," the doctor said. "I wasn't there 24 hours before I decided I was going to the Air Force Academy."

That trip started a 10-year journey of self-discovery that began with him bucking the pilots-in-training trend at the academy for a career in healthcare.

Now, 10 years later, Dr. Childs is a board-certified physical therapist, holds a doctorate in rehabilitation sciences and is director of research at Wilford Hall Medical Center's physical therapy department at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

And he's one of a handful of officers and enlisted people quietly rehabilitating the image of a career field dedicated to, well, rehabilitation.

"As we establish more evidence to support the effectiveness of physical therapy, the demand for our services is increasing," the doctor said.

"I'm pretty excited about being at the forefront of a new era for rehabilitation based on a solid research foundation."

At 32, Dr. Childs is technically not part of that baby boomer generation, but he is intimately familiar with the aches and pains that come through his door. From knee pain caused by years of running to occasional backaches, he is feeling the pain himself these days.

"I can relate when they tell me their knees hurt," said the doctor, who runs about an hour a day four times a week. "My knees are starting to hurt more as I get older. And I've felt a few back twinges every now and then. It makes it easier to understand what the patient is feeling."

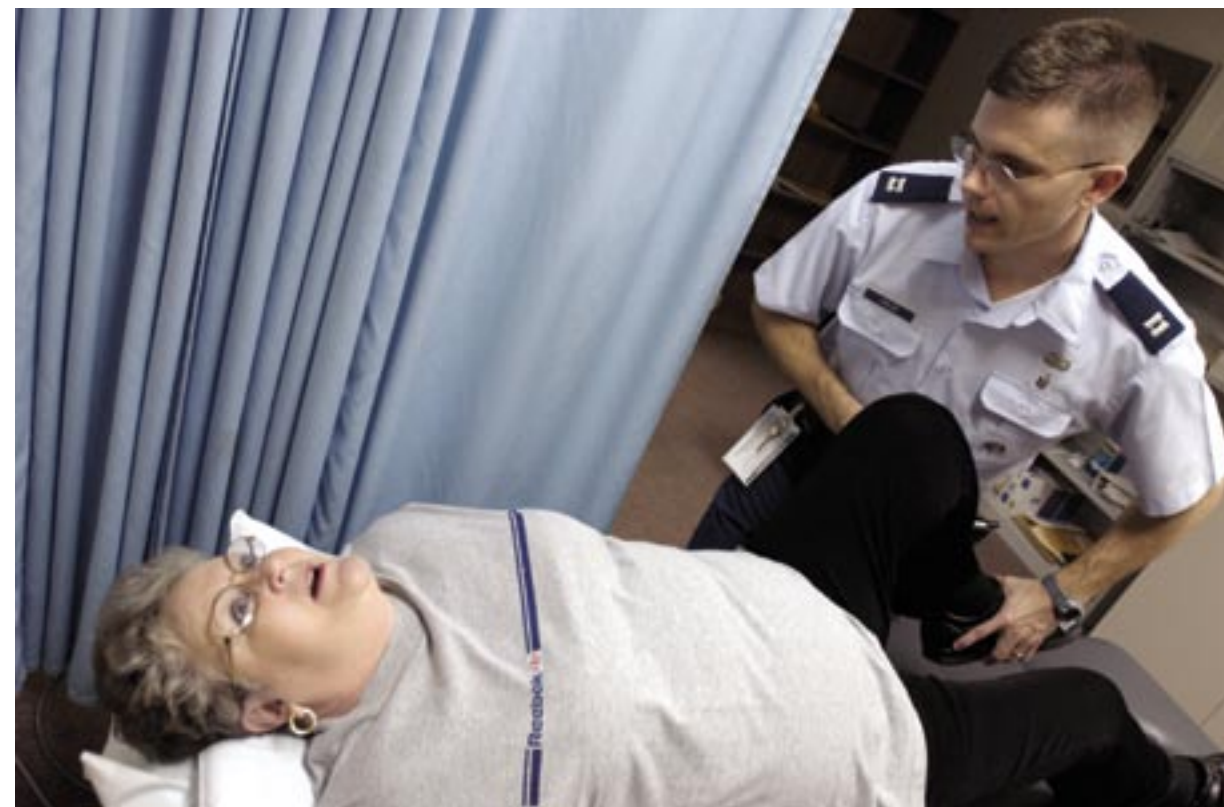
His interest in health began in high school. As a teenager in Trussville, Ala., he played basketball in high school and saw how pain affected people and their ability to perform even simple tasks.

"I wanted to get involved in sports therapy," he said. "I thought I could help people."

He decided the military lifestyle was active and interesting and chose to get his bachelor's degree in biology through a military academy. Along the way, he met his wife, Amy, and the couple had three children.



Capt. (Dr.) John Childs



The doctor's desire to ease pain led him to focus a lot of his research and clinical practice on back pain. Next to the common cold, back pain is the number one reason Air Force people see their doctors, he said. He's put his "natural instinct to problem-solve" to work determining who is prone to back problems and how best to prevent pain and disability.

"With back pain, 80 to 90 percent of the time we don't know what is really causing the pain," he said. "If we can determine which people are at risk for back pain, we can identify preventative strategies that may reduce, or at least delay, its onset. If we do that, we can save the Air Force substantial time and money, and we can keep Air Force people functioning at the highest level."

Each day at his Wilford Hall office, he sees about a dozen patients with a variety of aches and pains. And while many come in afraid he's going to twist them into pretzel-like contortions to shake something loose, Dr. Childs said he usually finds a way to send people out of the office feeling a little better than

when they came in.

"I'm here to make you better," he said, "not to make you hurt. I'm disappointed if I can't improve a person's symptoms before they walk out the door. It's an indicator that I've missed something, and that's not acceptable to me." ☺

Hip and knee problems led 61-year-old Heide Crary to Capt. John Childs, who performs a series of exercises to help restore mobility to her legs. The doctor's health care philosophy is simple: Make physical exercise part of your healthcare regimen when young to avoid the pain when older. Mrs. Crary, the wife of an Air Force retiree, agreed. "At this point in my life, I recognize the merit of keeping the body young," she said. "I wish I had done more to take care of myself when I was younger."

Capt. John Childs, Ph.D.

Senior physical therapist and director of research, department of physical therapy, Wilford Hall Medical Center, Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.

Years in Air Force: 10

Hometown: Trussville, Ala. — "Trussville is small. I usually tell people I'm from Birmingham."

Reason for joining: "I saw an Army commercial during [a televised college football game] and thought the military would be a good place to not only get my education, but do something interesting." Later decided on the Air Force Academy after a visit to Colorado Springs, Colo.

Assignments: Fort Sam Houston, Texas, 1994 to 1996, student in joint Army-Baylor University physical therapy master's program; Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., 1996 to 1999, staff physical therapist; Columbus AFB, Miss., 1999-2000, element chief; University of Pittsburgh, 2000-2003, student in rehabilitation science doctorate program; Lackland AFB, Texas, 2003 to present, senior physical therapist and director of research, Wilford Hall Medical Center.

Coming up: Ongoing research in back pain.

The best thing about the job: "Making people feel better."